# George Kennan, Iran hawk

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Martin Kramer January 4, 2011

In the November issue of *Foreign Policy*, Karim Sadjadpour, Iran analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, published an essay entitled "The Sources of Soviet Iranian Conduct." Until recently, Sadjadpour had been one of the foremost advocates of "engagement" with the Iranian regime—a policy that has come to naught. Now he makes a fallback case for "containment," explicitly evoking the memory of the renowned American diplomat George F. Kennan. It was Kennan who, in his famous "long telegram" of 1946 (later published as "The Sources of Soviet Conduct"), first elaborated the concept that became known as "containment." That approach guided much of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union through the Cold War.

Sadjadpour employs the rhetorical device of taking ten passages in Kennan's famous essay and substituting "Iranian" for "Soviet," "Tehran" for "Moscow," "Khamene'i" for "Stalin," and so on. Kennan is thus transformed into a full-blown prophet "anticipating today's Iran.… Kennan's wisdom does not call on the United States to shun dialogue with Tehran, but merely to temper its expectations. In the process, Kennan would caution, America should remain 'at all times cool and collected'—and allow the march of history to run its course." One is led to conclude that a resurrected Kennan would have the United States avoid military confrontation with Iran, preferring to "contain" it by other means.

Kennan died in 2005 at the age of 101, and just what he would say about Iran today is anybody's guess. But if the exercise is valid at all, perhaps it is only fair to ask what Kennan *did* say about Iran. During two crises, in 1952 and 1980, he made policy recommendations—in 1952, to the State Department in private, and in 1980, to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in public.

## 1952

In 1951, Iran's new nationalist premier Mohamed Mossadegh challenged Britain over control of Iran's oil. This prompted Kennan (by that time, January 1952, a private citizen awaiting confirmation as ambassador to the Soviet Union) to write a long, unsolicited memo intended for Secretary of State Dean Acheson.

"The thesis to which we acquiesced in Iran," he wrote, "that such arrangements [i.e. Western concessions] can be cancelled or reversed abruptly, on the basis of somebody's whim or mood, is preposterous and indefensible." The West had every right to thwart Iran's actions by force: "Had the British occupied Abadan [Iran's oil fields and refineries], I

would personally have no great worry about what happened to the rest of the country." The only possible concern, he added, was the Soviet response. But if the Soviets wanted war, "I doubt that Abadan would be the place they would choose to start it. Abadan is a long way from the Soviet frontier."

Indeed, if *any* of the West's vital strategic assets in the Middle East were jeopardized by "local hostility," Kennan argued, they should be "militarily secured with the greatest possible despatch." "To retain these facilities and positions we can use today only one thing: military strength, backed by the resolution and courage to employ it. There is nothing else that will avail us." The least concession would invite disaster:

> The idea that the appetites of local potentates can be satiated and their deep-seated resentments turned into devotion by piecemeal concessions and partial withdrawals is surely naïve to a degree that should make us blush to entertain it. If these people think they have us on the run, they will plainly not be satisfied until they have us completely out, lock, stock, and barrel, and then they will want to crow for decades to come about their triumph, in a way that will hardly be compatible with minimum requirements of western prestige. The only thing that will prevent them from achieving this end is the cold gleam of adequate and determined force. The day for other things, if it ever existed, has now passed.

Kennan was unconcerned that the "locals" might resist in any effective way: "If we do this quietly, with determination, and without being apologetic about it, there may be a great many flamboyant words and a certain amount of brandishing of weapons against us, but I doubt that there will be much more." And he dismissed counter-arguments that forceful action might mire the West in conflict—estimates "often based on calculations relating to a major adversary, when it is actually a local adversary with which we would have immediately to contend." In other words, the Persians weren't Russians.

The argument for "containment" of Iran was made not by Kennan but *against* him. The push-back came from State Department's Near Eastern Affairs bureau, which reacted with alacrity to his key proposal. "We cannot view with equanimity the suggestions about a possible British occupation of Abadan," wrote the bureau head in response to Kennan, "with its conceivable attendant consequences in the rest of Iran. It appears to us that the moral disaster for us in the rest of Asia might well prove incalculable…. We still believe that patient, intelligent, constructive statesmanship offers the best prospect of basic solutions. There are still some indications that we may yet find solutions to the Iranian oil problem."

Kennan had the last word in the exchange. If the United States persisted in its mistaken approach, he warned, it could lose "those specific facilities which are really vital and important and could probably quite successfully be held by force and determination." The United States could only "rescue some of the most vital of the western positions" by "act[ing] rapidly, with determination, discarding our fatuous desire to be 'liked' and making it clear that the Russians are not the only serious people in this world."

## 1980

By the time of Iran's revolution, Kennan's status as a revered wise man of foreign affairs had grown enormously. In February 1980, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee invited him to testify in the midst of a double crisis. Iranian militants had seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November, and the Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan in December. The committee sought Kennan's insights on the best U.S. response.

The headline of the *Washington Post* on the morning after Kennan's appearance told a surprising story: "George Kennan Urges Tougher Stance on Iran." Just how tough? Here is the first paragraph of the report (by Don Oberdorfer, February 28, 1980):

> Veteran diplomat and historian George F. Kennan yesterday advocated a declaration of war against Iran over the hostage issue and quiet diplomacy with the Soviets over Afghanistan as well as a range of other alternatives to current U.S. foreign policy.

On reading this, all of Washington must have gasped, and it is worth repeating Kennan's precise words to the committee, since he spoke some of them in prepared remarks and others in the course of an exchange. There was, he said in his prepared remarks,

> a limit on the time we can afford to temporize with the problem [of the hostages]. If we temporize too long, our concern for their safety may be deprived of much of its meaning. I feel therefore that we should hold in readiness means of unilateral pressure on the Iranian regime, not excluding the military one, which, if the efforts of the Secretary General of the United Nations should fail, might be more effective in persuading the Iranian authorities that it would be to their interest to release these people.

The committee chair, California Senator S.I. Hayakawa, a conservative Republican, could hardly believe his ears, and he pressed Kennan on "military alternatives." "What would it do to the fate of the hostages?" Sen. Hayakawa asked. "Would we have a confrontation with the U.S.S.R. if we took that path? At the same time I am not disavowing such a path, still I would like to ask some questions about the dangers and prospects involved."

Kennan then dropped his bombshell:

> A number of times, since these people were locked up and since we began to hear the series of unprecedented insults and expressions of contempt for this country that we have heard from the ayatollah [Khomeini], I have wondered why we and our Government did not simply acknowledge the existence of the state of hostility brought about by the behavior of the Iranian Government, and, having done that, then regard ourselves as at war with that country. Having taken that step, then we could do the normal thing, which would be to ask a third power to represent our interests in Iran, in which case the hostages would become their immediate responsibility, not ours. We would then also intern the Iranian official personnel in this country, I hope humanely, and not in the way that they have interned ours—because, after all, we have obligations to ourselves, too. But by doing this, we would put ourselves in a position, first of all, to offer the Iranians something to get them off the hook; namely, an exchange of their personnel, which might be helpful. But in any case, it would also put us in a position to make our own decisions about such military action that we might wish to take if it became necessary.
>
> I don't think that it would be useful for me to speculate on the sort of things we could do, because some of them might necessitate taking advantage of the element of surprise.

Kennan did allow that "any sort of harsher action against Iran to solve this problem" would have to be prefaced by "careful communication with the Soviet Government in an effort to explain to them exactly what we are doing and why." As in 1952, the Soviet reaction mattered to Kennan—and other possible reactions didn't.

This wasn't the only hard line Kennan toed. Even if Iran did release the American hostages, Kennan urged that the United States regard Iran as a pariah until it admitted its error. From Kennan's prepared remarks:

> Even should the hostages be released, it would be wrong for us to attempt to establish at any early date normal official relations with the present Iranian regime. What the Iranian authorities have done has been a grievous affront to international law, to diplomatic practice, and to the entire international community. To offer to forget it before there has been evidence of a clear readiness on the official Iranian side to recognize their fault, accompanied by satisfactory and reliable assurances against the repetition of such conduct, would not offer a promising basis for future relations with that regime.

In the subsequent Q&A, Sen. Hayakawa pointed to "Khomeini's approval of the terrorists and all them being totally intransigent and not admitting any fault whatsoever." He asked Kennan "from whom can we expect this recognition of their fault without an overthrow of the present government?" Kennan did not think the regime was "very firmly" in power. "But if they do remain in power, and if they continue to take this present attitude, I would certainly not think that we should send any other official personnel there or have diplomatic relations with them at all."

The Kennan testimony, and especially the call for a declaration of war, ricocheted through Washington, and it prompted a column by conservative journalist William F. Buckley, Jr. "I wasn't there," wrote Buckley,

> but I can imagine that the Senators stared at [Kennan] as though he had been entered by an incubus. Dr. Strangelove. Professor Kennan continued with his characteristic calm. Yes, we should have declared war, and then instantly interned all Iranians living in this country, holding them hostage against the safe return of our own citizens. We should, moreover, have prepared to take such military measures as might seem advisable in the event our hostages were harmed.
>
> Holy caterpillar! To declare war in this country would require a researcher to inform the president and Congress on just how to go about doing it.

Buckley waxed enthusiastic about the idea of a war declaration (he called it "a wonderful demystifier") and praised Kennan for proposing it: "That such a recommendation should have been made by someone once dubbed one of the principal ambiguists among American intelligentsia reminds us that purposeful thought is still possible."

But Kennan also drew flak. One contemporary critic, the columnist and former Democratic presidential adviser John P. Roche, wrote that "some have unkindly suggested that Kennan's declaration of war was an indication he is senile." Not so, opined Roche, pointing instead to Kennan's archaic notions of diplomatic privilege. Kennan, he wrote derisively, "wants foreign service clubhouses to be shown the respect they merit. If not, send for a gunboat." Roche's preferred option on the hostages: "We just have to sit it out." Once again, the case for restraint was made not by Kennan but *against* him.

In sum, when Kennan was asked for his wisdom on Iran in 1980—and in a prominent forum, too—he expressed views directly *opposed* to those Sadjadpour would attribute to him. Sadjadpour: "Kennan's wisdom does not call on the United States to shun dialogue with Tehran, but merely to temper its expectations." In reality, Kennan did call on the United States to shun dialogue with Iran until it admitted the error of its ways—hardly a tempered expectation. Sadjadpour: "In the process, Kennan would caution, America should remain 'at all times cool and collected'—and allow the march of history to run its course." In reality, Kennan called for the United States to declare war on Iran and contemplate military action, in view of the "limit on the time we can afford to temporize."

In the very same testimony Kennan urged that the United States exercise supreme caution in challenging the Soviets over Afghanistan: "It is up to us to eliminate from our words or actions anything that might unnecessarily contribute to a heightening of the existing military-political tension." Why the vast difference in approach? For Kennan, the Soviets were a "major adversary" while Iran was merely a "local adversary." In Kennan's eyes, Iran *wasn't* on par with the Soviet Union—not even close—and deserved to be treated accordingly. Seizing and occupying Iran's oil fields, declaring war against it,

brandishing threats of military action—Kennan consistently advocated the toughest possible posture against Iran during the two great Iran crises he witnessed. He was ever respectful of Soviet Russia and always contemptuous of Iran.

So it isn't difficult to imagine a resurrected Kennan shocking a Congressional committee by insisting that the United States bomb Natanz. That Kennan instead has been turned into a posthumous supporter of "containing" Iran is amusing—or would be, if it weren't so misleading.

- *Sources*: Kennan's memo of January 22, 1952 and the subsequent exchange with the Near Eastern Affairs bureau are preserved in Kennan's papers in the Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton, box 164, folder 28. Kennan's Senate testimony of February 27, 1980 was published in Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *U.S. Security Interests and Policies in Southwest Asia*, pp. 87-123.
- *Note*: An abbreviated version of this post also appeared as a letter in the January 2011 issue of *Foreign Policy*, with a reply by Karim Sadjadpour. More on this to come.

THE IRAN X-FILES [with REPLY]
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# THE IRAN X-FILES

THE SOURCES OF SOVIET IRANIAN CONDUCT

Karim Sadjadpour wishes to present U.S. diplomat George Kennan as a prophet "anticipating today's Iran" who would instruct America to "remain 'at all times cool and collected'—and allow the march of history to run its course" ("The Sources of ~~Soviet~~ Iranian Conduct," November 2010).

Perhaps it is only fair, then, to ask what Kennan did say about Iran during his lifetime. In 1952, when Iran's nationalist Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh challenged the West's control of Iranian oil, Kennan wrote to Secretary of State Dean Acheson urging that the West show Iran "the cold gleam of adequate and determined force.... Had the British occupied Abadan [Iran's oil fields and refinery], I would personally have no great worry about what happened to the rest of the country."

During the Iranian hostage crisis in 1980, Kennan told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the United States should declare war on Iran and "hold in readiness means of unilateral pressure on the Iranian regime, not excluding the military one." William F. Buckley praised Kennan's uncharacteristic tough talk, adding, "I can imagine that the senators stared at [Kennan] as if he had just been entered by an incubus."

In sum, when Kennan did offer his wisdom on Iran, he expressed views opposed to those Sadjadpour would attribute to him. Why? Iran was no Soviet Union, and Kennan held its pretensions in contempt. It's not far-fetched to imagine a resurrected Kennan suggesting that the United States bomb Natanz. That Sadjadpour turns him into a posthumous supporter of "containing" Iran is amusing—or would be, if it weren't so misleading.

**Martin Kramer**
Wexler-Fromer Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy
Washington, D.C.

**FROM FP.COM**

**PROF.JOHNJMEOWSHEIMER: My concern is that this comparison is so broad you could apply it to any number of cases. One could have had Iran crossed out and replaced with North Korea. Let's not forget that we've tried this "wait it out" strategy**

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**with them before. But even North Korea, with its corruption, incompetence, and widespread famine, has managed to stay in place for the past 60-odd years.**

**MUSICMASTER: I seriously doubt that the U.S. can expedite change. Economic sanctions have as their main effect that more power flows to the enterprises controlled by the Revolutionary Guards.**

**KARIM SADJADPOUR REPLIES:**
I thank Martin Kramer for his sober response. My intent was not to endorse George Kennan as a foreign-policy prophet but to note the striking parallels between Kennan's characterization of the Soviet regime and that of the current Iranian regime. Furthermore, while I found Kennan's views toward Iran in 1952 and 1980 interesting, given how dramatically the political context has changed they don't tell us much about how he would have approached Iran in 2010. Recall that Donald Rumsfeld warmly embraced Saddam Hussein in Baghdad in 1983; 20 years later he organized a massive "shock and awe" military campaign against him.

Today's Iran is central to at least a half dozen major U.S. foreign-policy challenges: Afghanistan, Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict, terrorism, energy security, and nuclear proliferation. Bombing Iran would likely severely exacerbate, not ameliorate, these challenges.

Today's Iran has the most vibrant and promising democracy movement in the Islamic Middle East.

Also in contrast to 1952 and 1980 is that today's Iran has the most vibrant and promising democracy movement in the Islamic Middle East. There exists a near-universal consensus among Iranian democracy activists that military action could render their movement stillborn and entrench the Iranian regime's most radical elements for many years to come.

Finally, Kennan appreciated that military adventures were not to be entered into lightly. A few years before his death in 2005 at age 101, Kennan was asked what advice he would give then-President George W. Bush and his national security team in dealing with Iraq. "Whenever you have a possibility of going in two ways," Kennan said, "either for peace or for war, for peaceful methods or for military methods, in the present age there is a strong prejudice for the peaceful ones. War seldom ever leads to good results."

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## WHAT SAVED JAPAN?

Clyde V. Prestowitz makes so many misleading statements that it is difficult to know where to begin ("Lie of the Tiger," November 2010). For one, Japan's economic miracle was not the result of "subsidized investment in 'strategic industries.'" While various Japanese bureaucracies did indeed want to pursue such policies, the final policies were ultimately the product of a political process: Industrial subsidies throughout the period were primarily focused on the slowest-growing industries, namely processed food, mining, and textiles. Electrical machinery and automobiles received the least support. The closest parallel in the United States was the recent bailout of domestic auto companies—subsidies went to dying industries, not thriving ones.

Furthermore, the Japanese economy's collapse over the past 20 years has little to do with tough U.S. trade policies. Rather, the extended crisis was the cumulative result of macroeconomic policies pushed by Washington and voluntarily implemented in Tokyo. During President Bill Clinton's administration, Larry Summers, Timothy Geithner, and Laura Tyson—familiar faces in the current recession—argued that Japan needed massive fiscal stimulus. Unfortunately, that allowed Japanese banks and companies to avoid necessary restructuring. Later efforts proved too little too late, as Japanese taxpayers still find themselves footing the bills for corporate bailouts.

There is a valuable lesson in that for Washington. But maybe Prestowitz really believes it's possible for government policy to somehow outsmart the market.

**Dick Beason**
Professor of Business and Economics,
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Canada

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Prestowitz knows the "real" story of the American industrial response to Japanese competition in the 1980s, having been part of that successful reaction while in the U.S. government and afterward. I heard him describe